



## **gotta be fresh from the fight by glorious\_spoon**

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**Summary:**

*“This is the worst idea you guys have ever come up with,” Steve says, using the nail bat to push aside a veil of stringy, faintly glowing filament so they can duck underneath without touching it. He doesn’t know for sure if it’s toxic, but this is Hawkins, and strange glowing vegetation in caves is probably better avoided. It’s a moonless, cloudy night and they’re underground, so it should be dark, but everything is lit by an eerie greenish light. “And trust me, that’s a high bar.”*

\*

Jonathan, Nancy, and Steve hunt alien cave monsters and maybe start to figure a few things out.

**gotta be fresh from the fight**



"This is the worst idea you guys have ever come up with," Steve says, using the nail bat to push aside a veil of stringy, faintly glowing filament so they can duck underneath without touching it. He doesn't know for sure if it's toxic, but this is Hawkins, and strange glowing vegetation in caves is probably better avoided. It's a moonless, cloudy night *and* they're underground, so it should be dark, but everything is lit by an eerie greenish light. "And trust me, that's a high bar."

Jonathan turns back to look at him. The line of his cheekbone is limned in that unearthly glow, the shadows of his face carved stark. The edge of the machete in his hand glints, sharp and wicked. "You didn't have to come."

"What, and leave you two to deal with it all by yourselves?"

"We had it under control," Jonathan says, sounding annoyed. "You don't always have to—"

"Hush," Nancy hisses from farther up ahead. Jonathan's mouth snaps shut, and Steve adjusts his grip on the bat.

"What is it?" he whispers.

"I'm not sure," she says back, just as quietly. "Something's up there."

"Great," Steve mutters. She's right, though. The glow is stronger up ahead, although it doesn't seem to actually illuminate much of anything. It's not just the creepy plant life that's glowing now; it seems to be coming from the walls, the ceiling, even the floor, like whatever's making the light has coated every surface. When he glances down, the soles of his sneakers are glowing faintly, too.

Yeah, he is *so* taking a shower the second he gets home. Possibly burning his clothes, too.

Something is moving at the far end of the tunnel. Something sluggish, and luminous, and *huge*.

"Shit," Steve breathes, stepping up until he's shoulder-to-shoulder with Jonathan, gripping the bat tightly. Out of the corner of his eye,

he can see Jonathan glance up at him, but he doesn't move away. Nancy is still up in front, pistol gripped firmly in both hands. "Nance —"

"I think it's asleep," she whispers, and edges closer. Jonathan makes an abortive motion with his free hand, like he's going to grab for her before she steps out of reach, then swears under his breath and follows. Steve keeps pace with him, even when the tunnel narrows enough that they're bumping shoulders and elbows every time they move. Surprisingly enough, Jonathan doesn't try to shove him away. He's close enough that Steve can hear the sound of his breathing, slightly too fast— not quite panicky, but not far off it, either.

Nancy, by contrast, seems perfectly calm. Her small form is silhouetted in the sickly glow coming from deeper inside the cavern, and beyond her is the massive shape of... something.

It actually takes him a minute to wrap his head around what he's looking at. Something about the thing defies categorization. It's enormous, and chitinous, segmented limbs that coil and twitch lazily. If they are limbs. They seem more like armored tentacles, or vines. The center mass is a massive, bulbous, glowing shape that pulses with a slow, stuttering rhythm that makes his eyes hurt when he looks straight at it for too long.

"What... the fuck," he murmurs finally. "Is it even alive?"

"It's moving," Jonathan murmurs back, but he sounds uncertain.

"It *ate* two people," Nancy says, glancing back at them with an impatient expression that's made significantly more ominous by the eerie half-light.

True. It was on the gas station security footage. Unless there are *two* armored alien squid monsters in town, which is kind of horribly plausible. Steve squints at the thing. "I don't see a mouth."

"Maybe it's hidden."

"Where?"

"Under the—" Nancy waves her gun at the thing. "Arms. Tentacles.

Whatever they are.”

“Okay, but—”

“Do you guys really need to have this argument *now*?” Jonathan hisses. His elbow bumps Steve’s again as he shifts his weight, staring at the thing. Steve elbows him back, but it’s a fair point.

“Okay,” he says, and looks at the thing. Squints, his eyes watering, and looks away. There’s something profoundly *wrong* about it in the way that things from the Upside Down are always wrong, something impossible to put a finger on.

Well, beyond the fact that it’s a glowing alien monster the size of a truck.

“Okay,” Steve says again. “So how do we kill it?”

Jonathan looks uncomfortable. “It’s sleeping.”

“So, what, you think we should wait until it wakes up and tries to eat us too?” Steve says incredulously.

“No, I just—”

“*Shut up*,” Nancy snaps suddenly, and Steve lifts his head and oh.

Shit.

Well, it’s not sleeping *now*. The long, segmented, ropy limbs are uncoiling from the center mass. They don’t exactly look like tentacles but they don’t exactly look like anything else, either. There are no joints that he can see, and the things are fucking *fast*. One of them whips out at Steve’s face, and he dodges to the side an instant before it can lay him out.

Jonathan isn’t so lucky. Another tentacle slams into him, sending him airborne for a heart-stopping moment before he crashes hard to the cave floor and doesn’t move.

“Jonathan!” Nancy screams, sounding afraid for the first time tonight, and then she’s airborne too, gripped in an armored limb and

slammed against the wall high enough up that her feet don't touch the floor. Steve charges, swinging the nail bat with all his might, and another tentacle smashes into him, sending him sprawling. The bat rolls away from his fingers. His ears are ringing.

Jonathan is laid out a few feet away, his head rolling on the floor, dazed, the machete still in his lax fingers. They should have brought a flamethrower. Or possibly a tank.

Steve glances at the nail bat, which is too far away to retrieve, at least without getting grabbed himself, then dodges toward Jonathan, snatching up the machete from his lax grip and advancing on the monster.

Oh, God, this is a terrible idea and he is definitely going to die. "Hey! Over here!"

"Steve, what are you *doing*?" Nancy shouts. Her voice chokes off at the end when the tentacle presses against her throat, and a bolt of something frozen and furious goes through him, pushing the fear aside.

He swings the machete again, sweeping the gory blade through the air, making himself as big as possible. "Over here! Come on, asshole, I'm right here!"

He's definitely got the thing's attention now. There are no eyes that he can see, but the massive, bulbous body reorients itself, tentacles swinging through the air, a maw in the thing's center mass gaping open, jagged and black. The stench is suffocating.

Steve has all of three seconds to regret every choice he's ever made that brought him to this moment, and then one limb—tentacle—*thing* is curling around his chest so tightly that he feels his ribs creak, and he's swinging through the air toward its mouth. He grips the machete with both hands as he's plunged into a suffocating, furnace-hot, foul-smelling darkness, and stabs upward with all his might.

The blade sinks into the roof of the thing's mouth with a horrible squelching noise, drenching him with acidic blood. The tentacle wrapped around his chest tightens convulsively, and he chokes off an



agonized gasp as he feels something *crack*.

Then it releases him all at once. He drops a few feet, lands on a wet, spongy surface. Shifts his grip on the machete and hacks blindly at what he *hopes* is the inside of the thing's mouth— maybe he can't kill it, but at least he can make it rethink going after the other two—

The *crack* of a gunshot splits the air.

Another shot, then another. The thing convulses around him, and then he's rolling suddenly out into cooler air, landing hard on the rocky cavern floor. He lifts his head, blinking and dazed, to see Nancy on her feet, pistol in hand, eyes blazing as she squeezes off another shot.

The thing lets out a cracked scream like nails on a chalkboard, all its limbs flailing suddenly. He hears Nancy call out his name with sudden panic, and just barely has the presence of mind to roll out of the way before an armored tentacle as thick as a tree branch crushes his skull to powder.

There's a sudden, resounding silence.

Steve rolls onto his side, gagging on the taste of ichor in his mouth, and gets one arm under him, peering back at the monster. His chest is full of an unpleasant splintering kind of pain, but on the upside, the thing is leaking gore from half a dozen wounds, and it isn't moving.

There are sudden quick footsteps, then small, strong hands on him, hauling him up to his feet. He stumbles, staggering against Nancy for a moment before he can find his balance.

"Huh," he manages. His voice comes out raspy and mangled. "Good shot, Nance."

"You," she says, low and fierce, "are *such* an idiot, Steve Harrington."

"Worked, didn't it?" There's a groan from the far end of the cave, and then Jonathan's head lifts. Steve lets out a breath, startled by the surge of relief that goes through him. "Hey, Byers. How's the head?"

"Th'fuck," Jonathan manages, putting his head back down. Nancy

lets go of Steve and hurries over to him, kneeling down to peer at the split across his forehead. Her fingers prod gently at his face, and he winces. "Is it dead?"

"God, I fucking hope so," Steve says, wrapping one arm around his injured ribs. He's trying to breathe shallowly, but it still hurts like a motherfucker, an awful cramping pain spidering through his torso every time he moves.

"I think you're concussed," Nancy says briskly, sitting back on her heels, but even in the dim light— *dimming* light, he realizes; the glow from the monster is beginning to fade— her face looks pale and worried.

"Coulda told you that," Jonathan says thickly, but he lifts a hand to touch her cheek. There's something so tender about the gesture that Steve has to look away. "'S'okay. I'm okay."

"Still," Nancy says. "We should get you out of here. Can you stand up?"

"Uh," Jonathan says, somewhat less than encouragingly. He gets one elbow under him, and then the other, and keels over on his side like a broken puppet. "Ow."

"Oh, my God," Steve mutters, and picks his way over to them to help. He crouches down carefully and slides one arm under Jonathan's shoulders, hauling him up, which is— huh, a really bad idea. A really *bad* fucking idea, oh, God. Ow.

"Steve?" Jonathan says hesitantly after a minute, swaying on his feet but standing independently, and Steve realizes that he's bent almost double, clutching his ribs like he can hold himself together with his bare hands. "Are you okay?"

"Awesome," Steve says. His voice comes out in a thin wheeze, but after a moment he manages to straighten up. "We should probably, uh. Get out of here. Nance, the nail bat, could you—?"

"I have it," she says, rooting through the sickly glowing webbing underfoot until she comes up with the bat, settling it on her shoulder.

Peers at the two of them, looking worried. “Can you guys walk?”

“Course,” Steve says, and proves it by taking a stumbling step forward, hooking the toe of his sneaker under a tree root, and nearly face-planting. Jonathan catches him with a hand on his arm, and almost goes down himself. Steve extricates his foot, takes a look at Nancy’s anxious expression, and adds, “Maybe?”

“I don’t think I can walk,” Jonathan says, with the kind of too-careful articulation that Steve usually associates with drunk people. He’s swaying in spot like a tree in a high wind.

“Okay, I’m going to go get help—”

“No!” Steve and Jonathan chorus at once as she turns away. Nancy glances back at them, raising her eyebrows.

“I’m the only one of the three of us who can walk in a straight line,” she says after a moment. “What do you think you’re going to do if we meet another one of those things? Trip over it?”

“That was mean,” Steve says mildly. Jonathan’s hand is still on his arm, enough pressure in his grip that Steve is pretty sure that he can’t stay standing on his own. So at least it’s mutual. He can’t blame Nancy for the skeptical expression on her face; the pair of them are a mess. “Maybe we want you to protect *us*, did you think of that?”

Beside him, Jonathan laughs, then winces. “Ow.”

Nancy is clearly trying to glare at him, but her lips are twitching and it’s not quite working. Finally, she sets the bat down, crosses back over to them, surveys the two of them with her hands on her hips, then stand on her toes to kiss Jonathan briefly on the mouth. “You look terrible,” she says, very gently. “You both do. Give me your keys, stay here, and I’ll be back soon with the Chief. Okay?”

Then, to Steve’s surprise, she cups his cheek in one hand and kisses him, too, just a quick, familiar brush of lips.

“Um,” he says, cutting a glance at Jonathan, who looks— huh. Neither surprised nor upset by that.

What the hell.

“Okay?” Nancy says again.

“I feel like I’m missing something,” Steve says, and Jonathan sighs, and nods like he’s acquiescing to an argument that Steve can’t hear. He digs in his pockets, coming up his keys, and hands them over to Nancy.

“Okay,” he says. “Just be careful.”

“Of course I will.” Nancy sounds almost offended, like she’s someone who’s never done a reckless deed in her life instead of Nancy freakin’ Wheeler. “You, too. Both of you.”

She kisses Jonathan again, then slips out of the cave and disappears into the dark woods beyond.

Steve stares after her for a long moment, wondering if there’s some kind of hallucinogen in the glowy shit that’s all over the place, or if that really just happened. Meanwhile, Jonathan starts picking his way across the floor to sink down against the cave wall.

“Should you be touching that?” Steve asks.

Jonathan looks down at his sleeves and hands, which are smeared with glowing streaks, then at Steve, who is completely covered in glowing monster slime and smelly blood, and shrugs, mouth quirking into a lopsided smile. “Too late now.”

“Jesus Christ,” Steve sighs, and goes to sit next to him. Close enough that he can feel the warmth of Jonathan’s body, not so close that they’re touching. “How’s your head?”

“Hurts,” Jonathan says succinctly. He tilts until his shoulder is just bumping Steve’s. Not quite leaning against him, which is good since he’s like ninety percent sure that he has at least one cracked rib, but enough to feel, a friendly point of contact in the chilly damp. His dark hair is tangled, falling into his eyes, his fine features sharply drawn in the dimming light. There’s a thin trickle of blood coming from where his forehead split, but it doesn’t look like it’s still bleeding.

“Can I, uh—” Steve starts, lifting a hand tentatively, like he’s expecting Jonathan to slap it away, which, okay, he kind of is. They’re sort of friends now, but it really only is *sort of*.

Jonathan doesn’t slap his hand away. He holds still while Steve pushes his bangs out of the way to peer at his head, the fine strands catching on his fingers. Hisses across his teeth when Steve prods gently at the goose egg forming there, but doesn’t complain.

“Yeah,” Steve says eventually, his fingers still resting on Jonathan’s face. “That looks like it hurts. You need an ice pack or something.”

Jonathan’s dark eyes flick up toward his face, and Steve drops his hand, abruptly self-conscious. “Why, do you carry an ice pack around with you?”

“I probably should, considering how often this shit seems to happen to us,” Steve sighs, shifting his shoulders against the wall, trying to find a comfortable position. Not likely. Good thing basketball season is over, because he won’t be moving comfortably any time soon. “So are you going to tell me what the hell that was about?”

“What?”

“That. Earlier. With Nancy.” When Jonathan doesn’t answer, he glances over at him. “Come on, man. Seriously?”

“I,” Jonathan says, and clears his throat, and looks away. Doesn’t pull back, though; Steve can still feel the warmth of him pressed close. “I think you should probably ask Nancy about that.”

Steve looks at his profile for a moment, his sharp nose and narrow eyes and stubborn chin, the soft fall of his messy dark hair. Thinks about touching him again, and doesn’t. “Is she going to tell me it was just an adrenaline thing?”

A corner of Jonathan’s mouth curls up. It’s impossible to be sure in the dim light, but Steve thinks he might be blushing. He doesn’t look up. “No. Probably not.”

*And what about you?* Steve thinks, but doesn’t quite have the balls to say. Instead, he lets his hand drop onto his leg, his knuckles just

brushing the outside of Jonathan's thigh.

After a while, Jonathan reaches down wordlessly and tangles their fingers together.

They stay like that, not talking, until Nancy gets back.